

**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW  
#364**

**DONALD GAY STRATTON  
USS *ARIZONA*, SURVIVOR**

TRANSCRIBED BY:

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**USS *ARIZONA* MEMORIAL  
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Donald Stratton (DS): My name is Donald Gay Stratton. I was born on a farm outside of Inavale, Nebraska, about seven miles west of Red Cloud, Nebraska. Red Cloud is where I went through the school system from the fourth grade to graduation in June of 1940. I was given a plaque for being the best all-around athlete for that year, 1940. Joined the US Navy in October of 1940. Went to the Great Lakes Training Station. Went aboard the USS *Arizona* in Bremerton, Washington the last part of 1940. Made seaman first class while serving in the Sixth Division aboard the *Arizona*.

December 7, 1941 was a Sunday morning, like any other, or so we thought. We were up and around and having breakfast. I had finished eating and picked up a few extra oranges in my white hat to take to a buddy in sickbay. His name was Harland Nelson. And he was from Rouston, Arkansas. He had went to sickbay the day before with a little touch of jaundice. He and I had the ship's incinerator.

Everything was burnt when we were at sea. Nothing was thrown over the side.

After breakfast, coming out of Number Six casemate, where I slept and ate, someone or several someones, shipmates, were yelling and pointing toward Ford Island. Looking over there, I saw some planes dropping bombs, seeing what I thought was the water tower topple over. Started to my battle station right away as everyone seemed to think that was the proper thing to do. My battle station was on the former switch, it was called the sky control platform. I was the sight setter in the port anti-aircraft director. By that time, general quarters had sounded. Everyone was on station, as far as I know. And the port anti-aircraft battery had started firing at the planes, which we could see were Japanese. Some planes were so high over our bursts of the shells that we were way short. We couldn't reach 'em.

Suddenly the ship shook violently, which is a pretty good shake as it weighed 33,600 tons. Then a horrible explosion and a fireball about 400 feet in the air. A bomb had hit aft of Number Two turret and some aviation gasoline and ammunition, which exploded and loosened 120 foot of the bow of the ship off.

Of course we were all hurt, or burned really mostly. And we had used up all of our ready box of ammunition. Virtually everything in turmoil. The Japanese were strafing us also. The USS *Vestal* was tied outboard of us as they were doing some work on the *Arizona*. We could not go down the ladders as everything was burning. A sailor aboard the *Vestal* threw us a heaving line and we pulled over a heavier line and tied it off on the *Arizona*. Then the six of us that were left started hand over hand across to the *Vestal*. We were all burnt pretty bad so pretty hard to hand over hand across that line. I myself was burned over sixty percent of

my body. Also was about forty-five feet in the air over a lot of fire and water.

There were somewhere around fifty to seventy men who manned sky control platform with the portside and the starboard side. And only six of us went across the line. I had no idea where the others went or what happened to them.

In the port anti-aircraft director there was Dvorak, Zimmerman, Halloran, Lott, Bruner, myself—Stratton—Ensign Lomax, and the first class fire control man and a few others I don't recall. Of course, on the sky control platform, there were ship and aircraft spotters plus man-to-man director for the main battery, the fourteen-inch guns.

After we were aboard the *Vestal* for a while, we were put on a motor launch and taken to the landing where we were loaded aboard an open-air truck and driven to the naval

hospital. Spent quite a few days there then was loaded aboard the USS *Scott* for a trip to Mare Island Naval Hospital, arriving Christmas Day, 1941. Was in Mare Island Hospital and Corona Hospital until September 1942, when I was medically discharged.

Was out of the service a little over a year when I reenlisted through the draft in early 1944. Was held in Omaha until they got permission from the navy to let me back in. Same service number, 3166970. Was sent to Farragut, Idaho to a second boot camp. I was a recruit CPO for a company of men going through Camp BEN-NING.

Could have stayed there at least for a while and run boots through camp, but requested sea duty. Was sent to Treasure Island and was attached to the USS *Stack*, DD406, a destroyer.

USS *Stack* left for South Pacific and was in on the invasions of New Guinea, \_\_\_\_\_, Hallamahara, Leyte, Luzon and Okinawa. That was while I was aboard.

Was transferred to naval repair base San Diego for electrical hydraulic school, which I was finished and was transferred to St. Louis, Missouri for discharge second time, December 4, 1945.

Returned to Red Cloud, Nebraska for a few years. Met and married Velma Lockhart from BLAY-DEN, Nebraska. We had four children. Robert Vaughn Stratton, the oldest son, lives in Santa Barbara, California, was born in 1951. Gypsy Dawn Stratton was born in 1952. Randy Don Stratton, who lives in Colorado Springs, Colorado, was born in 1954.

Roxanne Jo Stratton was born in 1956. Unfortunately, we did not get to keep the two girls who died three and five days after birth.

After a few days in Hastings, Nebraska, running our beer truck, we moved to Santa Barbara, California, where I became an able seaman and was a barge master on some of the well drilling barges. Then went to work for the deep sea divers and worked all over the world—Alaska, Nicaragua, Columbia, Chile, South America. Also in Kuwait in the Persian Gulf. Finally retired, moved to Yuma, Arizona where I am today.

My oldest son lives in Santa Barbara yet with his wife, Alice, daughters \_\_\_\_\_ Beth Stratton, age twenty-six, Kimberly Dawn Stratton will be twenty-one, and grandson Robert Vaughn Stratton, age nineteen, was drafted in the first round by the New York Mets at the age of eighteen years old, out of high school, San Marcus High School, Santa Barbara, California.

Younger son, Randy Don Stratton lives in Colorado Springs, Colorado with wife Cathy and two daughters, Jessica Jo



Stratton will be fifteen shortly after Christmas and Nicole Kathleen Stratton will be eleven in January.

Note about Harl Nelson, the buddy that I was going to take the oranges to. He did not survive as sickbay was on second deck down, about where the first devastating bomb hit. He was from Rouston, Arkansas and had family there and that's about all I know. He and I were assigned to the incinerator for three months. I don't know what happened to the oranges. I guess they were left in the port anti-aircraft director.

The incinerator was on the boat deck, port side, outboard of the ship's stack. Life aboard ship was not so bad as some people think. The Sixth Division aboard the USS *Arizona* was the boat deck division. They handled all the motor launches, two fifty-foot motor launches, two forty-foot motor launches, two motor whaleboats, the admiral's barge, captain's gig. Also had a whaleboat for the rowing crew, of

which I was a member. I also played on the football team. They also manned and maintained a five-inch anti-aircraft guns on the port side. Maintained the decks, boat \_\_\_\_\_ and so forth, such as holystoning the decks, scraping and painting the bulkhead and parts of the foremast.

My medals consist of a Purple Heart, American Defense with one star, Philippine Liberation, with two stars, Aviator Pacific Campaign, with seven stars, Good Conduct Medal, Victory Medal from World War II.

I've been going through some skin grafts for the last three years on my arms from skin off my legs. Pretty good right now, ha ha. After very nearly fifty-five years, should be I guess. I was discharged December 4, 1945 after finishing electrical hydraulic school in repair base San Diego, California. Supposedly entitled to gunner's mate second class rating, but was discharged before receiving it. I guess that is all of that. Well, best regards, Don Stratton.

(Taping stops, then resumes)

DS: This is an interview by Al Hemingway. Uniforms meant nothing. Air raid, Pearl Harbor, this is no drill. When that message appeared on the desk of Secretary of the Navy, Frank Knox, he was horrified beyond belief. "Oh my god, this can't be true! This must mean the Philippines," he shrieked.

Sadly, it was not the Philippines but rather it was Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The date was December 7, 1941, "a day," according to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, "that would live in infamy."

Perhaps the most stunning picture to emerge from that awful event is the one showing the battleship USS *Arizona* engulfed in smoke and flames. That terrible sight will

forever be etched upon people's minds when they recall or read about the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor.

From the outset, the Japanese aircraft appeared to be focusing the fire power on the helpless *Arizona*. Shortly after eight a.m., a resounding explosion that, in the words of one eyewitness, "sounded like a large 'boom,'" jarring people and seemed to suck the very life out of the air.

Reports have said that Petty Officer Noboru Kanai, a premier bombardier in the Japanese navy, was given the credit for scoring a direct hit upon the *Arizona*. The bomb struck near the Number Two turret and it floated in the forward magazine section of the vessel. Kanai's heroism was short-lived. While attacking Wake Island on December 16, 1941, excuse me, his plane was downed by U.S. aircraft fire, anti-aircraft fire.

When Kanai's projectile detonated on the *Arizona*, the frightful explosion resulted in a massive chute of scorching flame and thick, billowing black smoke that reached skyward 500 feet. It's dynamic force moved dozens of men off the *Nevada*, the *Vestal*, the *West Virginia*. One naval officer at nearby Mary's Point, sickened by the sight before him, cried.

Refuse from the eruption filled the air. Sections of the *Arizona* littered the battleship, USS *Tennessee*, which resulted in further damage to that ship. Shaken onlookers recoiled in horror as parts of the ship, legs, arms, and heads of man, all sorts of bodies showered other ships who were adjutant to the *Arizona*.

Onboard their battleship itself were a thousand sailors and marines were lost in a flash. Their admiral, Isaac C. Kidd and Captain Van Valkenburgh, were killed instantly as they

stood on the bridge. One survivor would later comment, "The ship was sinking like an earthquake had struck it."

In the end, the final total were forty-seven officers and 1056 enlisted men dead. And five officers and thirty-nine enlisted men wounded. It was perhaps the worse tragedy in American history. For those who witnessed the devastating air assault on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, they will tell you it was utter chaos.

It was a day where rank was forgotten and everybody joined together to restore order and fend off the attackers.

"Uniforms meant nothing," Chief Petty Officer Albert MULTER would later remark.

Serving aboard the USS *Arizona* at the time was a young gunner's mate named Donald G. Stratton. In a recent interview from his home in Yuma, Arizona, Stratton talked

about that tragic day and how he miraculously escaped the blazing inferno that overwhelmed the ship.

Hemingway, "You entered the navy prior to the war breaking out. Were you seeking adventure?"

Stratton, "Not really. There just wasn't much going on. To make a few bucks in those days was difficult. I was from Red Cloud, Nebraska and we were still suffering from the Depression. I enlisted in 1940, right out of high school."

Hemingway, "What was your assignment in the navy?"

Stratton, "Well, I thought, I went through boot camp at Great Lakes, Illinois. After my leave, I reported to Seattle, Washington on the USS *Arizona*, which was in dry dock there. I was a seaman first class at the time of Pearl Harbor attack. Back in those days, to make seaman first class wasn't that easy. There were four battleships in our

division, *Nevada*, *Oklahoma*, *Pennsylvania*, and the *Arizona*.

Over a three-month period, they would have three seaman first class ratings for four ships and to get one, you had to be a pretty damn good seaman. I was on the boat deck. I wound up being a boatswain's mate and a gunner's mate striker.

We were responsible for launching and retrieving all motor launches and captain's gigs and whatever. I also had to clean, wash, scrub and polish all the brass on the decks I was assigned to. In addition, we had to maintain the anti-aircraft guns.

Hemingway, "Besides the fourteen-inch guns, what other armament did the *Arizona* carry?"

Stratton, "Well, there were a dozen fourteen-inch guns on the *Arizona* to start with. On the boat deck, where I was, our responsibility was the five-inch guns, anti-aircraft. They



were twenty-five caliber, fixed ammunition, actually anti-aircraft guns to be more specific.

The first four divisions had charge of the four turrets. Those were the big fourteen-inch guns. I was in the Sixth Division.

Hemingway, "What type of maintenance did you and your shipmates perform on the anti-aircraft guns?"

Stratton, "All the normal things, painting, cleaning and checking the barrel assemblies. The fire control technicians had to check electrical and hydraulic equipment that enables the gun to operate. The gunner's mates had to keep up the fuse box, loaders, firing pins and their ram assemblies."

"Where did you go from Seattle after being assigned to the *Arizona*?"

Stratton, "We went to Hawaii right away. In June of 1941, we sailed to Long Beach, California for two weeks. After that, it was back to Pearl Harbor."

Hemingway, "Could you describe the events leading up to the attack?"

Stratton, "Well, we were out at sea. As far as we knew, we were supposed to fire a practice gunnery run the following Tuesday. However, we fired it that Friday, December 5, came in Saturday the sixth and was there for the attack on Sunday, December the seventh. If we had stayed out to sea and fired our practice run like we were going to, we wouldn't have been there."

"What happened to you that Sunday morning?" Hemingway.

Stratton, "Everything was normal, business as usual.

Everybody was sleeping in. Only married personnel had

permission to live ashore. All other enlisted personnel had to be back on board the ship by one o'clock in the morning. We were all, mostly all up when they had just finished breakfast and I saw some loose oranges on the table. I picked some up and put 'em in my white hat to bring to a friend of mine that was in sickbay.

I walked out the hatch onto the fo'c'sle and some of the sailors on the bow were yelling and pointing toward Ford Island. I took a look and seen the water tower go over and some bombing going on. I automatically ran to my battle station, which was one deck above the bridge, which was one deck above where the admiral, Admiral Kidd and Captain Van Valkenburgh were killed. That was on the mainmast.

I was a sight setter in the port anti-aircraft director. And those oranges are still there, I guess. I don't know.

Anyway, we started firing. We had a ready box of ammunition behind each gun. We used all of that. Also, we were firing at a ninety-degree angle and were having quite a time trying to hit anything as most of the planes were too high.

We could look up and see that our bursts were very short and we weren't even coming close to the Japanese bombers. Then we caught a bomb, a big bomb. As I understand it, the bomb was especially built. These projectiles were in fact adapted sixteen-inch armor-piercing rounds that weighed about one ton. Rumor circulated later that they had been bought by the Japanese from the British just before the start of the war. This bit of gossip later proved to be untrue.

The bomb hit right after of Number Two turret, on the starboard side, and penetrated into the bow of the ship. I was told we were carrying about 180,000 gallons of aviation gasoline because we did have three planes. The ammunition

coupled with this fuel detonated, causing a huge explosion. A 300 or 400, 500-foot ball of fire shot straight up in the air, enveloping the ship. As a result of this, we were all burnt to hell.

The *Vestal*, an old repair ship, was tied up alongside of us, doing some work on the *Arizona*. Some seaman on board, top deck, threw us a heaving line and we pulled over a heavy line and the six of us went hand over hand from the *Arizona* to the *Vestal*. That line was about forty-five foot in the air and that's how the six of us got off the ship.

Hemingway, "You mentioned that the *Arizona* had three planes aboard her. What type of aircraft were they and what were they, what was their purpose? Did the ship, what purpose did the ship have them?"

Stratton, "All the battleships carried planes. They were OS-2Us, Kingfishers. They were seaplanes and utilized for observation and search and rescue."

Hemingway, "How were they launched and how did they land? Was it similar to a carrier type operation?"

Stratton, "No. They were catapulted off the fantail or from atop Number Three turret. The aircraft carried two people. When the plane was ready to land, we had a boom that we would rig over the side. This boom had a sled with a cargo net on it. The ship would turn at about forty-five degrees and smooth out the water in the wake. The plane would land in the wake, running up onto the sled and back off its engines and hopefully catch the hook on the pontoon on the cargo net. If this was successful, the aircraft would be traveling at the same speed as the ship, then the crane would reach out and retrieve the plane and put her on board. This was all done as the ship was under way."

Hemingway, "That's amazing."

Stratton, "And this was fifty years ago, fifty-five years ago! I assisted in that operation many times."

Hemingway, "Those fourteen-inch shells carried a wallop."

Stratton, "I can recall one time spending all day rigging targets for the fourteen-inch guns. We were twenty miles out, away from the ship. We couldn't even, we could not even see the ship. We went out on a fifty-foot motor launch to do this. We were allowed so much time to rig the targets on the raft then we had to return and pull up alongside a seagoing tug (coughs)—excuse me—that was out there with us, towing the target. When the ship fired its fourteen-inch guns, you could actually see the shells coming in. They were big and weighed about a ton apiece. I believe the armor-

piercing shells weighed 2700 pounds and stood about five foot tall.

Hemingway, "Getting back to December 7, where did you go after you made it to the *Vestal*?"

Stratton, "From the *Vestal* they took us to shore and they put us in an open-air truck and transported us to the U.S. Naval Hospital. I got to Mare Island Naval Hospital on Christmas Day 1941. In mid-September 1942, I was medically discharged for burns over my body, especially my left arm and leg. I was burned over sixty percent of my body. Also my left hand wasn't working too good.

I was out about a year and re-enlisted in the navy. I went through boot camp again in Idaho. I was assigned to the USS *Stack*, \_\_\_\_\_, at Treasure Island, San Francisco, California. The *Stack* returned to the South Pacific and participated—excuse me—in all the invasions



from \_\_\_\_\_ New Guinea, the Philippines and Okinawa. I came back to the U.S. in July of 1945 and went to electrical hydraulic school in San Diego, California.

The war ended in August 1945 and I had enough points to be discharged. However the navy would not let me out until I completed the school. I was finally released for the second time in St. Louis, Missouri, December 4, 1945.

Hemingway, "Why re-enlist after what you endured at Pearl Harbor?"

Stratton, "Well, I don't know. I didn't get a very good shot at 'em at the first time. I still won't drive a Japanese car or buy any other Japanese product for that matter, if I can help it. It's not for me to judge but I still can't forgive those individuals who blew up my ship, killing over 1100 of my shipmates."

Hemingway, "I can understand your feelings."

Stratton, "Counting the plane spotters, plotting room crew, the people who manned the fourteen-inch gun range finders and all those in the port and starboard anti-aircraft directors, that number was approximately fifty to sixty and of that fifty or sixty, only six of us made it across the line to the *Vestal*. I think there is only three of us alive today. In the last five years, I've had three or four skin grafts on my left arm. I am still suffering today, but not as bad any more. God bless our service people of today. They've done one hell of a job in Desert Storm and are now doing one hell of a job in different parts of the world. Thank you very much. This is Don Stratton, over.

END OF INTERVIEW